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SUBJECT: HAMBURG POLITICIANS UNDERSCORE SPD DILEMMA ON AFGHANISTAN

CLASSIFIED BY: Karen Johnson, CG, Hamburg, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Two senior Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Hamburg Landtag representatives discussed the London Conference and the German-Afghanistan debate with Hamburg P/E staff on January 28. While the SPD is struggling with internal party calls to limit military engagement and quickly withdraw German troops from Afghanistan, the CDU is increasingly mindful that it can no longer sit on the sidelines and ignore calls for increased German support. End summary.

¶2. (C) Hamburg Deputy SPD Caucus Leader Ingo Egloff pointed to the great uncertainty among the national SPD leadership concerning the correct approach toward German military engagement in Afghanistan. He noted the disarray among the party leadership that manifested itself in the recent federal SPD board meeting, to which Helmut Schmidt had been invited as a special advisor. In Egloff's view, the fact that Schmidt was invited highlighted the current SPD leadership's inability to devise a consistent strategy on its own. (Note: The irony of this invitation lies in the fact that Schmidt himself left active politics 28 years ago. End note.) Egloff said that the SPD is still mindful of the many voters it lost because of the former SPD/Greens government's decision to become militarily involved in the Kosovo war. He emphasized that the SPD is now determined not to allow The Left Party to distinguish itself as the sole peace party.

¶3. (C) According to Egloff, a 180-degree about-face of the SPD -- toward calling for an immediate withdrawal of all German troops from Afghanistan -- was only prevented by Bundestag SPD Caucus Leader Frank-Walter Steinmeier, whose credibility would be completely destroyed if the SPD adopted such a drastic position. As former Foreign Minister and SPD Vice Chancellor during the previous CDU/SPD coalition government, Steinmeier shared accountability for Germany's decision in favor of military deployments to Afghanistan.

¶4. (C) Hamburg CDU Caucus Leader Frank Schira noted that there is an increasing realization in Germany that peace has its price, and that "the days of checkbook diplomacy are finally over." However, he underscored that the German discourse on Afghanistan must be seen against the backdrop of a "60 year long tradition of peace" and an underlying pacifist mood among Germans. Commenting on the present political debate as a whole, Schira stated that responsible thinking on Afghanistan engagement currently prevailed in the SPD. He also noted that it was strong leftist sentiment that resulted in then-chancellor Helmut Schmidt's loss in 1982 over the controversial NATO decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear weapons. Schira's clear implication here is that Steinmeier could be at risk if he ties himself too tightly to the current government's Afghanistan policy.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Until recently, Egloff was Hamburg SPD chairman and a member of the national SPD Party Board; as such, he had his finger on the (national) SPD pulse. This is the first

time that we've heard a high-ranking state representative from the SPD remark that only Steinmeier's influence has prevented the SPD from pulling its support for continuation of the Afghanistan military deployment - a deployment the SPD advocated before being driven into the opposition. We find Egloff's assessment about Steinmeier a bit simplistic since the SPD caucus and the centrist SPD members have also supported the deployment to Afghanistan, not just Steinmeier. The SPD's credibility as a party will suffer if it calls for an immediate troop withdrawal, and the party's leadership knows this. END COMMENT.

16. (SBU) This message has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

JOHNSON